

Driving Safety



Taking a Defensive Approach

It's up to all of us to ensure safety on the road.

Sometimes, driving safely is a matter of paying attention to what others around you are doing. It's not something that necessarily comes naturally, so you might consider taking a special defensive driving course to learn more.

WHAT IS DEFENSIVE DRIVING?

Defensive driving can help with keeping yourself (and your vehicle) out of harm's way. Anticipate the unexpected by looking ahead past the car or truck that's immediately in front of you. Keep your speed under control and maintain a safe distance from others. Try to anticipate how other drivers will react to road conditions, traffic or signs and signals. Always remember to adjust your driving based on the weather, pedestrians and bicyclists, or road hazards.

In some states, completing these defensive-driving courses can lead to significant savings on your insurance premiums. Talk to representatives from your local office of motor vehicles to find out more about classes in your area. If you decide to take a defensive-driving course, you may get relief after receiving a traffic violation.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Regardless of your age or



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level of driving skill, taking a defensive driving course can be beneficial. Programs may vary a bit, but you'll learn more about the basics of this key element to the safe operation of a motor vehicle. They'll discuss traffic accident statistics, including when most collisions happen and which age groups have the highest rate of incidents.

You will become more familiar with the safety features of your vehicle, including devices like seat belts, child-safety seats and airbags. They'll discuss approaches that will help you to avoid accidents, including passing techniques, maintaining a safe following distance, road sharing, and being aware of potential hazards ahead. Finally, it's

important to understand the risks of impaired driving while under the influence of alcohol, mind-altering substances, anger or exhaustion.

TAKING A COURSE

Locating a reputable class in your vicinity shouldn't be difficult. Many states provide convenient options for courses, whether online or in a

classroom. When choosing which format suits you best, think about your own personal learning process. Some drivers prefer the direct interaction of an in-person setting where they can get immediate responses to any questions. Others appreciate the flexibility of online courses, which allow them to study at their own speed.

Staying Safe on the Highway

The nation's elaborate network of interstates, U.S. highways and state roads makes it easier than ever to move around the country.

These high-speed streets, however, present several critical dangers to drivers.

DISTRACTED DRIVING

It's important to stay safe – and aware – when using these busy routes for long trips. The same is true when running errands or commuting to work involves time on an interstate. The Federal Communications Commission reports that hundreds of thousands of Americans are actually on their phones while behind the wheel.

As a result, far too many people die every day as a result of accidents linked to distracted driving. Stay off your phone on any highway, especially since the higher speed limits on interstates can lead to more severe accidents.

FOLLOW AT A SAFE DISTANCE

Typical safety guidelines recommend following the three-second rule when behind other cars and trucks. The guideline helps ensure that drivers have enough time to respond to sudden hazards, such as the vehicle in front stopping suddenly. But how to



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measure that?

Choose a reference point, like a road sign, mailbox or tree to measure your distance. Start counting when the vehicle ahead reaches that reference point, and note how long it takes for you to reach the same place. Modify your speed to create more space, as needed.

STAY IN YOUR LANE

Most states have signs urging drivers to stay to the right unless they need to change lanes. The left lane is generally meant for faster traffic, allowing vehicles to pass those who are moving more slowly. If you travel slowly in the passing lane, it can create a backlog of traffic behind you

– and that poses a new safety risk. Additionally, if an emergency vehicle needs to access an open lane, slow-moving traffic can hinder their response time.

MERGE SAFELY

Merging onto the interstate during peak hours can be exceptionally nerve-wracking.

To ensure a smooth transition, begin by checking whether the lane is clear. This requires taking your attention off the road ahead, of course, but it's important to note the traffic flow behind you while continuing along the merge ramp. Look for a safe gap to enter, adjusting your speed as necessary.

Watch Your Blind Spots

It's possible to get into a traffic accident while paying close attention to the road. That's because every vehicle's design leaves some areas that are not immediately visible to the driver.

Mirrors can help, though sometimes you must physically turn your head or lean over to see.

GETTING STARTED

Before you start driving, adjust your mirrors so that you have a clear picture of everything beside and behind your vehicle. Then move to the left and right to find other obstacles that may not be immediately visible. As you get underway, look out for people or animals out on the road. Pay special attention to other cars, trucks and motorcycles – but also pedestrians and cyclists. Signals will indicate potential issues ahead, including traffic signals, road signs and other announcements that provide directions. Remain alert to construction workers, police officers and event staff managing traffic.

ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY

Car and truck manufacturers are improving highway safety by incorporating modern safety features to warn drivers of possible dangers.



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Many new vehicles come standard with blind-spot detection systems, which use sensors to keep watch on the sides of the vehicle for other cars entering blind spots. Typically, if a lane change is unsafe, vehicles equipped with this feature will indicate a warning on or around the side mirrors. Beyond minimizing lane-change

collisions, drivers with this technology may enjoy lower insurance rates.

STAY ALERT

When out on the road, you are responsible for your own safety as well as the safety of others. Avoid lingering in someone else's blind spots for long periods to help decrease

the chance of accidents. Exercise extra caution when driving near semi-trailers and other large commercial vehicles, since their visibility can be significantly limited.

SAFETY ON A BUDGET

If purchasing a newer model vehicle with modern blind-spot detection isn't in financial

reach, think about a budget-friendly alternative to boost your vehicle's safety. Local auto parts shops or dealerships may sell convex mirrors that you can affix to your current rearview or side mirrors. Many of these can be easily attached using an adhesive backing to broaden the view of what is happening behind you.

Taking a Long Road Trip

Driving long stretches can lead to creeping fatigue. You might be more tired than you even realize.

This risks falling asleep at the wheel, which would endanger yourself, your passengers and other drivers. So, schedule breaks or share driving duties with passengers during longer road trips. You could save a life.

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

Recent research reveals that some 150,000 adults reported dozing off while driving in any given month. National safety figures report hundreds of deaths in motor vehicle accidents attributed to drowsy driving alone.

PREVENTING DROWSINESS

Before leaving on a long trip, prepare for the journey ahead. Get a good night's sleep and be fully alert before you hit the road. Bring along caffeinated beverages like coffee or energy drinks, since those can help maintain alertness, but be careful not to overdo it. That can lead to jitteriness or irritability. General guidelines recommend limiting your driving hours during the timeframe when you typically sleep.

RECOGNIZING SLEEPINESS

Recognizing when you're



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sleepy isn't as easy as you think. Boredom can set in during long drives. But there are signs to help you identify when it's time to pull over for a break. Pull over immediately if your eyes begin feeling heavy, if you have difficulty maintaining focus, or if you find yourself excessively blinking. Be aware of

wandering thoughts or day-dreaming. This might include trouble recalling the last few miles or missing important traffic signs.

It's an emergency situation if you find yourself swerving between lanes or having difficulty keeping your head up. Sometimes, the first signs of sleepiness are simply feeling

fidgety or irritable. If you notice that staying focused on the road is a struggle, find a rest area or let someone else take over the driving.

TAKING A BREAK

Map out breaks for rest as you complete long-distance travel plans. If the weather permits, locate a campsite

along your route then bring your gear.

Spending a night outdoors can foster a connection with nature and leave you feeling rejuvenated for the next part of your journey. Many states fund well-maintained rest stops, or you may need to spend the night in a hotel along the way.

Watch for Construction Hazards

Road work can be a hassle for drivers, especially on a busy work commute. But these workers play a critical role in making sure road conditions are safe for everyone.

They put themselves at great risk by doing their jobs in the middle of heavy traffic. So exercise extreme caution when navigating through these areas.

BE PREPARED

Whenever possible, look for alternate routes to reduce the likelihood of becoming stuck in slow traffic. Avoiding work zones is the best way to lower the risk of crashes. If you must go through one of these zones, begin by slowing down. Pay close attention to signs or flagmen, since they'll provide critical directions. Be prepared to change lanes. Often one of them is closed, meaning that all vehicles have to then line up in a single file.



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PAY CLOSE ATTENTION

Safety in road work zones requires everyone to remain highly attentive while practicing defensive driving. Follow all posted speed limits to keep workers safe as they do their jobs. (You'll also avoid the risk of costly fines from highway patrol.) For anyone who plans to travel for vacation, research

possible road work, closures or construction zones along the way.

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

The dangers are very real, according to annual statistics compiled by the Federal Highway Administration. Nearly a thousand workers lose their

lives every year, with thousands more injured. The summer and fall seasons, when work crews are more often present, are the peak periods for fatal crashes. Rear-end collisions are the most common type of accident in work areas. Many fatal accidents take place on high speed-limit

roads like interstates.

THE BIGGEST RISK

Going too fast is typically the biggest problem. Speed limits in work zones exist to safeguard both workers and drivers. Be on the lookout for signs instructing you to reduce your speed as you approach

areas where workers are present. Most of the time, drivers are given advance warning that they'll need adjust their speed long before entering the active work zone. Use careful judgment when passing through these areas, since conditions or traffic may require you to drive at a slower pace.

Preparing Beforehand

Safety on the road can come down to small things drivers have taken care of before their key is ever in the ignition.

Pay close attention to dashboard alerts that indicate things like low tire pressure or an issue with the braking system. Equipment failure, especially at high speeds, can have catastrophic results. Listen for any strange noises, too. Sometimes, those are the only indicators that your vehicle has potential issues. Take your vehicle in for regular inspections and tune-ups to make sure.

YOUR LIGHTS

The lights around your vehicle are critical to letting others know where you are, when you're stopping and where you are going. You'll need the assistance of someone else to periodically check whether they're all in working order. Test both your high and low beam headlights, along with your taillights, turn signals, hazard lights and reverse lights. You can usually replace bulbs at home, but if they are in a place that's difficult to access – or if you're just not very handy – it's best to consult your car dealership or a local mechanic.

YOUR TIRES

Driving on old or damaged



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tires is very risky. Plenty of people put this purchase off because of the expense. But they usually wear out slowly enough that you can budget for the purchase. Familiarize yourself with how to check the tires. Use gauges that measure both the air and tread depth. These tools help to confirm

whether your tires are still roadworthy. They're available at any local auto parts shop. The usual advice is to replace tires when the tread has worn down to one-eighth of an inch. However, depending on the conditions of the roads where you drive, you might want to change them sooner.

Chronic low pressure indicates a problem with the tire.

OTHER ISSUES

Pay close attention to dashboard alerts, but also to unusual sounds. Both can be important indicators that something is wrong. For instance, if you notice a

squeaking or grinding sound when you hit the brakes, take your vehicle in for an inspection as soon as possible. A malfunctioning brake system poses a potentially fatal risk. These days, most dashboard light issues are diagnosed with a scanner by your dealership or local mechanic.

Sharing the Road

It can get crowded out there. But we all have a responsibility for our own safety and the safety of others when driving.

As you make your way down the nation's highways and byways, you'll be sharing the road with all manner of vehicles, from motorcycles to school buses and from big-rig trucks to bikes. Here's how to safely interact with these different types of traffic:

SCHOOL BUSES

School buses signal their approach to a stop about 300 feet in advance by using yellow flashing lights. Once the bus comes to a halt, a sign extends to inform other drivers that they must stop. It's critically important that drivers are careful and follow all signs when driving near a school bus, since children might be crossing the road. Always look around before continuing ahead on your drive, even if the bus has indicated that it's safe to proceed. Lives could be at stake.

BIG-RIG TRUCKS

Whether you call them big rigs, 18-wheelers or tractor-trailers, these oversized trucks are common sights on our highways. They play a vital role in transporting goods nationwide, but their large size can present very real

dangers out on the road. One of the biggest risks are their very large blind spots. It's best to avoid lingering in these areas where you can't be seen. Don't cut them off or pass them and then drastically reduce your speed. These monstrous trucks require a lot more time to stop compared

to smaller everyday vehicles.

MOTORCYCLES AND BICYCLES

Motorcycles can be hard to spot in a busy traffic situation. Their drivers are more exposed. Reduce your speed when they're around and keep them in sight. Nowadays,

their self-propelled cousins often have designated bicycle lanes along the roadway. These usually require vehicles to yield to turning or merging cyclists.

OTHER DANGERS

Drivers in rural areas may encounter farm vehicles on

the road. Work zones may include bulky vehicles and related construction equipment. It's important not to get distracted when you encounter these other dangers. Look for cones, flashing lights on signs and barrels that may indicate a change in speed limit or the need to change lanes.

